



News Release

For Immediate Release:
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Flu Season Update: More Influenza Cases Reported with Improved Disease Monitoring

(Salt Lake City, UT) - Influenza activity in Utah remains classified as widespread. As of February 8, 2002, there have been 184 laboratory-confirmed influenza cases reported. The case count is higher than last year's entire season case total of 130. However, increased disease monitoring for influenza at many urgent care facilities, emergency rooms and other health care facilities throughout Utah may explain this apparent increase.

"As part of Olympic preparation efforts and ongoing improvements in health care, health care providers are testing more patients with influenza-like symptoms," says Dr. Robert Rolfs, State Epidemiologist, Utah Department of Health (UDOH). "In previous years, such patients may not have been tested and would not have been reported with a laboratory-confirmed disease." School absenteeism rates and the rates of influenza-like illness at sentinel physician sites are two other indicators of the level of influenza activity. Both are at levels that are normal for this time of year suggesting that influenza activity is about as expected in a typical influenza season. Cases have been reported throughout all Utah health districts.

Utah's flu season typically runs from November through March, with peak levels often occurring in December and January; however, last year the peak was during the second week in February. Because cases will still be occurring during the Salt Lake City 2002 Winter Olympic Games, the UDOH continues to recommend that Olympic visitors, athletes, volunteers and workers be vaccinated against the virus. With additional large crowd settings and close living conditions (dorms) comes additional opportunity for the virus to spread.

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Influenza samples from Utah patients have been sent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The samples were tested and the CDC found that the current influenza vaccine protects against the most common strain of influenza in Utah this year.

Influenza is a very contagious viral infection of the respiratory system. Symptoms of influenza include fever, muscle aches, headache, congestion, runny nose, cough, sore throat, and general weakness. These symptoms usually appear one to three days after a person has been exposed to the virus. The influenza virus is spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes and sprays droplets that can be inhaled by others.

Hand washing, when done correctly, is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of communicable diseases. There is more to hand washing than you think! By rubbing your hands vigorously with soapy water, you pull the dirt plus the oily soils free from your skin. The soap lather suspends both the dirt and germs trapped inside and are then quickly washed away.

For more information about flu vaccinations and where the vaccine is available, call the Utah Immunization Hotline at 1-800-275-0659.

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